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U.S. Says NATO Agrees to Spend More On Conventional Arms After 'Grim' Report

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BRUSSELS—The U.S. claimed victory yesterday, halfway through a two-day meeting of Western defense ministers, in its efforts to get Allied nations to spend more on conventional arms in Europe.

U.S. officials attributed the American success partly to a gloomy American intelligence briefing presented during the session. The briefing's message was that Soviet military power has grown tremendously in recent years and that Russian leaders could be tempted to use it.

At a background session for reporters, two senior Pentagon officials, who declined to be identified, said defense ministers of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization have agreed to formally reaffirm NATO's decision, adopted in 1977, to try to increase each member nation's defense spending 3% a year, after inflation.

In addition, U.S. and British officials said, the ministers agreed to include language in a communique due today that calls for efforts beyond the 3% rise by those countries able to afford more, and sets new spending for military facilities, such as airfields.

Doubts Europeans Can Meet Target

German and British officials confirmed the decision to reaffirm the 3% goal through 1988 and to spend more on facilities. However, they expressed doubts that most European governments would be able to meet the target, which hasn't been fulfilled in most nations so far. What's more, they described support for the U.S. position as half-hearted and claimed the Germans had managed to pare back the figures on new facilities.

The U.S. officials said the ministers' decisions came after Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and other American officials had presented a "grim" report on the growth of Soviet military power. According to the Americans, the U.S. briefing "had a deep and profound impact" on the ministers, most of whose governments have opposed the 3% target as unfair and unrealistic.

During the briefing, the U.S. said Soviet forces "have achieved the capacity for extended, intensive combat in the central region" of Europe. In addition, the U.S. said the Soviets are building many more planes and ships than the West and claimed Soviet weapons production capacity has grown 34% since 1970.

Mr. Weinberger warned that because of a massive Soviet arms buildup accompanied by 10 years of lagging efforts in the West, there is "unprecedented danger" ahead during the 1980s.

"The current and prospective leaders of the Soviet Union," the Defense Secretary declared, "may be impelled by their lack of success in other fields to turn increasingly to the one field in which they have both confidence and capability — stark military power and military threats."

Weinberger Aims to Convince

Mr. Weinberger's aim at this NATO meeting was to convince his fellow ministers to take a more serious view of the Soviet threat. He also sought agreement on a very large conventional arms buildup in Europe as part of the secret defense "guidance" for the period 1983 to 1988 that the meeting is scheduled to produce.

It won't be known whether he succeeded in these tasks until the communique is issued today and its language is closely examined.

Nonetheless, any reaffirmation of the 3% target, especially if bolstered by language treating the figure as a minimum and by an ambitious defense plan through 1988, would be at least a symbolic win for the Reagan administration, which is raising defense spending while European governments cut theirs back.

When he first took office in January, Mr. Weinberger himself criticized the 3% target as an overly rigid way of measuring military effort. Since then, however, he has come to regard it as a useful, if minimal benchmark to be used in conjunction with specific pledges to take particular actions to improve defense.

By contrast, European ministers haven't tried to hide their disdain for the 3% language. A communique issued Monday by European NATO members omitted any reference to the goal, in contrast to last December's European statement.

Insufficient NATO Support

Mr. Weinberger's case was backed by NATO's military commanders, who have told the defense ministers that member nations aren't doing enough to maintain the alliance's conventional defenses. As a result, they argue, the West is being forced to rely too heavily on nuclear defense, which is difficult to deploy and is negated by Soviet nuclear power.

Canadian Admiral Robert H. Falls, chair-

man of NATO's military committee, warned the ministers that NATO's conventional deterrent could be lost entirely over the next five years unless spending rises sharply. He urged "concrete" action to back up vague pledges of support, including improvements in NATO's costly air defense system.

Adm. Falls's committee reported that Soviet troops are being reorganized with added tanks in each unit, that the Russians are deploying equipment for added divisions, and that the Red Army has finally gained the logistical support it needs to fight long, intense battles.

He predicted NATO would grant U.S. requests to cooperate with the U.S. forces protecting the Persian Gulf by granting indirect aid, such as overflight rights, and by actively helping in times of crisis.